Bangladesh-India Water Sharing Disputes: Possible Policy Responses

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Abstract

This paper assesses the Bangladesh-India water-sharing disputes which date back to the early 1970s with India's ill-conceived construction of the Farakka Barrage on the Ganges. Unfortunately, the bypassing of international laws and unilateral diversion of water from transboundary rivers has been the long-standing policy of India. Without any agreement with Bangladesh, it has embarked on constructing dams and diverting water from many transboundary rivers such as Teesta, Gumti, Khowai, Dharla, Dudkumar, Monu etc. India also reportedly blocked rivers such as Muhri, Chagalnaiya, Fulchari, Kachu, and many others in Tripura flowing into Bangladesh. This caused a steady reduction in water flow, mainly due to intensive water diversion by India. Meeting increased water demand of the fast-growing population in the coming decades will be a great challenge for Bangladesh while India continues its non-compromising attitude on water sharing from the international rivers. Against this backdrop, water scarcity will trigger conflicts and instability, its consequences may spill over state borders, and regional tensions will become a threat to international peace and security. The paper argues that the water issue need not be a cause for tension; rather, it can be a catalyst for cooperation as in the eastern Himalayas and Mekong river basin. Such cooperation is the only remedy to avert future water conflicts, obtain collective gains, and ensure sustainable ecosystems.

Why are existing policies not working with regard to water sharing disputes between India and Bangladesh? The conventional wisdom is lack of political and national consensus in both countries and lack of regional cooperation. An alternative explanation is that there are other hidden reasons like poor water governance, water scarcity in both countries, diplomatic incompetency of Bangladesh, big-brother attitude and unwillingness to abide by international law of rivers from the Indian side, etc. In this backdrop, there is no alternative but regional cooperation in water management; particularly India and Bangladesh must respect each other's legitimate rights and understand each other's needs to avoid any future water-related conflict.

The India-Bangladesh environmental conflict dates back to the early 1970s. In the case of Bangladesh, conflict rages with India over Ganges and Teesta water sharing. Remarkably, Bangladesh shares fifty-four rivers with India, and as a lower riparian country, has no control over them. Unilateral water diversion or withdrawal of water from transboundary or international rivers has been the long-standing policy of India. Without any agreement with Bangladesh it has embarked on constructing dams or diverting water from many transboundary rivers such as Teesta, Gumti, Khowai, Dharla, Dudkumar, Monu, etc. India had reportedly blocked rivers such as Muhri, Chagalnaiya, Fulchari, Kachu and many others that flow into Bangladesh from Tripura.[1]

Since the transboundary rivers are within the territory of India, it did not discuss or come to any agreement with Bangladesh on the blockage or diversion of waters of the rivers although the Indo-Bangladesh Joint River Commission (JRC) exists since 1972. India constructed the huge Farakka Barrage in 1975 in order to divert a portion of the dry season flow to increase the navigability of Calcutta port. Thereafter, when it went into operation in 1975, the fresh water supply of the Ganges decreased considerably with a number of consequent effects in the south-west part of Bangladesh. Especially agriculture, navigation, irrigation, fisheries, forestry, industrial activities, salinity intrusion of the coastal rivers, ground water depletion, river silting, coastal erosion, sedimentation, as well as normal economic activities have been adversely affected.

Since the very birth of Bangladesh, water-sharing disputes with India and Bangladesh have continued. In this regard, former United Nations water expert Dr. S.I. Khan said that, "The water dispute with India is as old as the inception of Bangladesh. It started even before Bangladesh when India's ill-conceived Farakka Barrage on the Ganges was built to divert water for flushing silt from the Hooghly River".[2] He also said that "Although Bangladesh has fifty-four trans-boundary rivers with India, there is only water sharing treaty with India on the Ganges River signed on December 12 in 1996. But India removed the guarantee and arbitration clauses in getting minimum water from the treaty". Maryam Mastoor (2011) argues that, "The Farakka Barrage was a major breach of trust by India as it had repeatedly claimed

before it started the project that the barrage would not cause any damage to Bangladesh. The same assurances are again being given over the Tipaimukh dam".[3]

Meeting increased water demand of the fast-growing population in the coming decades will be a great challenge for Bangladesh. Water scarcity can trigger conflicts; instability and the consequences may spill over state borders and may lead to regional tensions and conflicts.

Research Questions

This research investigates the major hindrances with regard to India-Bangladesh water sharing disputes. Two central questions are especially examined:

- Why are the existing policies not working?
- What are the likely policy responses to settle the water sharing disputes?

Significance of the Study

This study has great significance for both Bangladesh and India. As a crucial and basic life supporting element, water is the most precious resource for any country. It is indispensable for the continued security and survival of a state. While the demand for fresh water is increasing day by day around the world, its supply is decreasing. Thus, the gap between demand for fresh water and its supply has been ever-increasing globally. In this regard, a major report recently issued by the 2030 Water Resources Group including the World Bank estimated that, the gap between global water demand and reliable supply could reach 40 percent over the next 20 years; particularly in the developing regions, the water deficit could rise to 50 percent.[4]

Therefore, fresh water shortages are becoming a major cause of conflict both domestically, as well as between states. The growing world population, further need for irrigated agriculture, and rapid industrialization will make increasing demands on scarce water resources which will create future conflict. Therefore, water scarcity is one of the major ingredients in the security discourse. In the case of Bangladesh, water insecurity will be the greatest threat or challenge with regard to ensuring national security as its vulnerabilities come from both internal and external sources.[5] On the other hand, India also faces shortages in meeting fresh water demand. Furthermore, to meet growing demands, India and China are going to build 200 big and small dams on the Ganges, Brahmaputra, Meghna, and Yangtze rivers which will bring disastrous impacts on Bangladesh, leading to tensions between these states.[6] Therefore, this topic is of great importance for both countries.

The gap between supply and demand of water in Bangladesh is ever increasing. When the state will fail to provide it, this can lead to intense unrest and social instability. In this regard, the Chairman of National Disaster Management Advisory Council said, "water availability in Bangladesh is around 90 billion cubic meters (BCM) during the dry season against the demand of about 147 billion cubic meters, a shortage of nearly 40 percent, resulting in drought-like situation in large parts of the country".[7]

On the other hand, India's overall per capita water availability has also declined from over 5,000 billion cubic meters in 1950 to 1,800 billion cubic meters in 2005.[8] It may reach the threshold level of 1,000 billion cubic meters per capita in 2025.[9] The dominant perception in India is that the growth of population, pace of urbanisation, and economic development will accentuate the pressure on a finite resource and that the answer lies in large supply-side projects and long-distance water transfers.

The growing demand for fresh water will create competition over access to water resources, thus becoming an existential issue. Lastly, if we examine the Hasina-Manmohan Summit (2011), it is easily understandable how important the issue is for both counties. Although India was committed to signing a Teesta water sharing treaty, it was in vain as Mamata Bannerji, chief minister of West Bengal, was not willing to give more than 25 percent of water to Bangladesh.[10]

This is a matter of concern regarding the future of India-Bangladesh water sharing negotiation, as India has not shown any compromising attitude. Thus, this research has important legal, policy, and theoretical implications.

Conventional Wisdom

The conventional wisdom is that, with regard to water sharing with India, the existing policies are not working for lack of political and national consensus

in both countries and for lack of regional cooperation.

An alternative explanation is that there are other hidden reasons like poor water governance, water scarcity in countries, selective (regime-wise) foreign policy, and unwillingness to abide by international law of rivers from the Indian side.

Data and Research Method

This research paper is basically qualitative in nature and based on secondary data. Secondary sources are books, reports, published research studies, case studies, newspaper articles, seminar and conference papers, publication of national and international journals, magazines and documents available in the internet, government policies and plans. The interpretation of data was carried out keeping in mind the overall perspective of the research study. Efforts were made to integrate the data collected from different sources.

Testing the Conventional Wisdom and Alternative Explanations

The existing policies are not working as there is absence of integrated water sharing management, and from the Indian side there is no sign of concession. Being an upper riparian country, India diverts water according to its own will. Besides, there is a lack of strong diplomacy of Bangladesh and India doesn't obey international law of rivers. Moreover, due to lack of regional cooperation, the existing policies are not working with regard to water sharing with India.

The political party in power is another factor rendering policies ineffective. For example, when Awami League is in power, the relationship between Bangladesh-India is favorable. Thus, the Ganges water sharing treaty was signed by the Awami League regime in 1996 and the Teesta water sharing agreement was supposed to be signed in 2011.

The arguments for conventional wisdom on water sharing, as well as alternative explanation, are offered next. Conventional wisdom suggests lack of political and national consensuses and, lack of regional cooperation; the alternative explanations include selective foreign policy, poor water governance, water scarcity in both countries, and India's unwillingness to abide by international law of rivers.

Lack of Political, National Consensus

Lack of political and national consensus works as an impediment towards reaching any agreement. In this regard, Syed Saad Andaleeb, Editor of the Journal of Bangladesh Studies claimed, "We have developed a great deal of mistrust between the two nations. If we cannot insure that agreements with India will remain consistent over the long haul because of internal political discord between the two major parties, why would India commit to anything?"[11]

Ramswami R. Aiyar, former water resource secretary of India, in an interview almost a decade ago said that, "The fate of water sharing depends on political decision. When bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India are not as sweet as it should have been, all bilateral issues including water sharing become tough to resolve. Politically, good relations are the key to water sharing disputes. You see, when Hasina was elected as Prime Minister in 1996, it was possible to reach an agreement on the Ganges."[12]

According to water expert Ainun Nisat, "It is not possible to get Teesta water without political consensus of both (India-Bangladesh) the parties. Water sharing between Bangladesh and India is not a technical matter but political. If the political leadership is cordial then technical resolution is not a [difficult] matter at all".[13] Faridul Alam, Chairman, Department of International Relations, Chittagong University also believes that, "Lack of political understanding between the ruling party and the opposition always criticizing each other, is one of the major obstacles with regard to water sharing with India".[14]

Furthermore, absence of national consensus in both India and Bangladesh works as a hindrance with regard to water sharing. In the recent Hasina-Manmohan Summit (2011), there was severe absence of political, as well as national, consensus within the Hasina government. On the other hand, there was also absence of political consensus between Congress and Mamata's Trinomul Congress.

Lack of Regional Cooperation on Water Sharing

Lack of regional cooperation with regard to water sharing is a prime cause. Many scholars and experts think that it is not scarcity but lack of coordination and cooperation with regard to water disputes between the two countries. In this regard, Professor K.B. Sajjadur Rashed claimed that, "There are reasons for dispute between countries over sharing water, but basically it is because of lack of coordination, cooperation, and lack of legal umbrella".[15]

Selective Foreign Policy

Selective or regime-wise foreign policy is observed in Bangladesh-India relations. Some think that anti-Indian attitudes of BNP, Jamaat and the left-leaning parties work as a hindrance with regard to settling water disputes with India. When BNP-led Jamaat government is in power they avoid India and their brand of foreign policy is usually anti-Indian. In this regard, Smruti S. Pattanaik argues that, "While Awami League follows a policy of engaging India, Bangladesh Nationalist Party justifies its approach towards India as its attempt to portray its position as 'saving sovereignty and territorial integrity' of Bangladesh. As an ideological opposite of Awami League, the party has nurtured a domestic constituency that sustains a discourse of anti-Indianism".[16] Similarly, Indian foreign policy toward Bangladesh is also regime-wise. When Awami League is in power, Indian policy towards Bangladesh is a little soft as some argue. But, one can raise the question that, at present Awami League is in power: why has no agreement been signed on Teesta water sharing?

Poor Water Governance

Around the world, poor water governance is one of the major reasons for water crisis rather than water scarcity. In this regard, United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon argues that, "Water crisis is a crisis of governance, weak policies and poor management, rather than one of scarcity".[17]

According to Mr. Sompal, former Union Minister of State for Agriculture and Water Resources of India, none of the countries concerned—India, Bangladesh and Pakistan—has worked out a national perspective plan related to water resources.[18] For instance, in India, agriculture and water resources do not rank high on the list of government priorities although 60 percent of India's workforce is in agriculture and which still produces around 20 percent of GDP and accounts for up to 16 percent of total exports.[19] In fact, only 3.2 percent of all the planned resources are allocated for agriculture, and irrigation receives only a small share of this money, Mr. Sompal claimed. Even when money is allocated for water-related investments, most of it goes into flood management rather than for any kind of development. He also argued that it is not uncommon to see villages with good telephone connections but no access to good water supply. Furthermore, there are tremendous problems with water-related infrastructure. For example, canals are neglected and not properly managed, even though they are of great importance to water management.

In Bangladesh also, a severe water management problem is observed. In this regard, A.K. Shamsuddin, former Executive Engineer of BADC argued, "Although Bangladesh has the highest per capita freshwater available at its disposal among South Asian countries, it can hardly make proper use of it due to very poor internal water governance practices".[20] He also claimed that the most pertinent factors are: absence of a combined and comprehensive water use policy, inadequate regulatory measures, poorly structured institutions and their inefficient performance, lack of coordination between various institutions, and finally virtual non-existence of stakeholders' participation at the implementation level.[21] Therefore, absence of proper attention to water management is one of the prime reasons for water scarcity which leads to uncompromising attitudes towards any agreement.

Water Scarcity in Both Countries

Syed Muhammad Ibrahim claimed that, "Without water and reasonable water, Bangladesh will soon become a desert".[22] According to a survey conducted by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), there are three hundred and ten rivers in Bangladesh. Out of these, fifty-seven are border rivers, the condition of one hundred and seventy five is miserable, and sixty five are almost dead.[23] Eighty percent of the rivers lack proper depth. The latest study of BIWTA reveals that one hundred and seventeen rivers are either dead or have lost navigability. Such rivers include Brahamputra, Padma, Mahananda, Meghna, Titas, Dhaleswari, Bhairab, Sitalksha, Turag etc.

As the rivers become polluted, people become more dependent on ground water as a source of drinking water. It is reported that presently 86 percent of WASA's drinking water comes from ground water.[24] Besides, excessive use of ground water during the Boro season may have an adverse effect on the country's drinking water, warned International Food Policy Research Institute on January 23, 2010.[25] Given excessive use due to widespread urbanization, ground water recharge is not occurring as before. As a result, the water level is falling between 1-3 meters every year. For example, during the last 12 years the ground water level has fallen almost 34 meters.[26] According to a study conducted by the Bangladesh

Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC), in 1996 the ground water level was 26.6 meters in different parts of Dhaka City which fell below 60 meters in January 2008.[27] If this decline of ground water is to go on, it's a salient question as to what will be the real picture in 2050 when deep tubewells will also be unable to strike water. For example, in 2001, deep tubewells could strike water at a depth of 200 to 300 feet but now they have to go down about 1000 feet to get uninterrupted supply.

In Chittagong, Khulna, Jessore, Sathkhira, Madaripur, Shariatpur, Cox'sbazar, Narail,in North Bengal and in many parts of Bangladesh, water crisis has reached an alarming situation. To resolve the water crisis, even the army has been deployed in Dhaka City.[28] People are buying water from water agents. According to a report in The Daily Star, most residents of Rajshahi City Corporation are out of water supply network and therefore, Rajshahi City Corporation has initiated a program of selling bottled water even though one-third of the city's population is poor.[29]

Besides, in most places of North Bengal, hand-driven tube-wells have become dysfunctional because the water level has fallen beyond the extractable limit. In a word, the picture is grim. Along with this, arsenic pollution and salinity intrusion has added a new dimension to accelerate the acute water crisis in Bangladesh. It is ironic that Bangladesh has too much water during the monsoon season and too little during the winter months when no rainfall occurs. Thus the country is subject to both floods and drought.

India is now the biggest user of groundwater for agriculture in the world.[30] Ground water irrigation has been expanding at a very rapid pace since the 1970s. The data from the Minor Irrigation Census conducted in 2001 shows evidence of the growing number of ground water irrigation structures in the country. Their number stood at around 18.5 million in 2001. Of the addition to net irrigated area of about 29.75 million hectares between 1970 and 2007, groundwater accounted for 24.02 million hectares (80%).[31] On an average, between 2000-01 and 2006-07, about 61% of the irrigation in the country was sourced from ground water.[32] It is a matter of concern that, the share of surface water has declined from 60% in the 1950s to 30% in the first decade of the 21st century.

Unwillingness to Abide by International Law of Rivers from Indian Side

This is one of the prime reasons behind the Bangladesh-India water sharing disputes. Unilateral water diversion or withdrawal of water from trans-boundary or international rivers has been a long-standing policy of India. It has also constructed a huge Farakka barrage in order to divert a portion of the dry season flow to increase the navigability of Calcutta port in 1975.

By commissioning the Farakka Barrage in 1975, India seemed to have violated international law intended to deal with water-sharing disputes.[33] The Farakka barrage was grossly unfair in and of itself.[34] The diversion of Farakka waters caused enormous losses in food and fisheries production in Bangladesh over two decades. According to Ashok Swain of Sweden's Uppsala University, "Farrakka changed the river's hydrology, disrupting fishing and navigation, brought unwanted salt deposits into rich farming soil… and caused an annual loss estimated at 2-2.5% of GDP."[35]

On sharing of "common rivers" Article 9 of the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty obliges India to abide by the "water sharing agreements" with Bangladesh on principles of equity, fairness and no harm to either party".[36] But the real picture is different. Although a thirty-year water treaty has been in effect between the two countries since 1996, India has diverted water according to its own will, depriving Bangladesh from her just share during the dry season.

It is very unfortunate that India has postponed the proposed Teesta water sharing deal with Bangladesh amid opposition from West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Mamata had expressed her unhappiness about sharing of Teesta waters and strongly believes that Bangladesh should get only 25 percent of the share. But, it is the inalienable right of Bangladesh to have equitable share of the common rivers.[37] Mamata also thinks that the pact is unfair. The situation raises questions about her law abiding mentality and respect for international law as no state has the right to divert the natural flow of water within its territory through unilateral action. The question of water sharing treaty should not arise for an international river. If one looks at West Europe and North America the matter will be clearer. They do not divide the waters; instead, they engage in its joint

and collaborative use, development and preservation. During the last twenty years East Europe (i.e., Save river), Africa (i.e., Lake Victoria, Zambezi river), South America (i.e., Pantanal, Paraguay river) did the same.

Actually, water sharing for international rivers will be on the basis of international law of rivers. India has no right to embark or divert waters of international rivers like Ganges or Teesta. The International Law Institute in 1961 stated that every state has the right to utilize waters of international rivers subject to international law.[38] The International Law Association in 1966 laid down that every riparian state is entitled to a reasonable and equitable share in the beneficial uses of waters of international drainage basin. The UN International Law Commission in Article 7 also emphasizes that states shall utilize an international river in an equitable and reasonable manner and the riparian states shall exercise due diligence to utilize waters of an international river in such a way as not to cause significant harm to other co-riparian states.[39] Therefore, it is a legal right of Bangladesh to get an equitable share of international rivers. It is not benevolence that Bangladesh seeks but justice.

Moreover, the construction of the Tipaimukh dam for generating 1500MW on the transboundary Barak River' which is contrary to international law. has raised a hue and cry both in Manipur state in India and in Bangladesh. which is contrary to international law. According to Barrister Harun ur Rashid, It may be strongly argued that the proposed dam is contrary to:

- The 1997 UN Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses
- Fourth preambular paragraph of the Indo-Bangladesh 1996 Ganges Water Treaty
- Article 6 of the 1989 ILO Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples
- The 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity.[40]

Furthermore, the south bloc of India is divided in its attitudes towards friendship with Bangladesh.[41] M. Harunur Rashid in his article also claimed that the sentiment of the average Indians is that Bangladesh has been ungrateful for the sacrifices they made in 1971 for the liberation of Bangladesh.

Besides, we can also argue that opposition to Bangladesh by Mamata and some other parties is a politics of votes. This is also true for some political parties in Bangladesh like BNP, Jamayat, and Leftist parties who also oppose India for votes. Moreover, some argue that the bureaucracy of India functions as a prime hindrance towards relationship development with Bangladesh. With regard to settling bilateral issues including water sharing, the bureaucracy of India gives veto.[42] Furthermore, along with the absence of political and national consensus, lack of coordination among water and foreign ministry and the incompetency of Bangladeshi diplomats is another factor towards failure of reaching water sharing agreement. In this regard, Faridul Alam claims that, "There are many obstacles behind the existing water sharing issues: firstly, in the Joint Rivers Commission meeting Bangladesh is less active in bargaining than India, secondly, inclusion of experts in this particular issue is ignored; thirdly, our diplomatic inefficiency is notable".[43]

Many scholars think that, China, Nepal, and Bhutan can be included in the Joint Rivers Commission. In this regard, Islam Shafi Noor argued, "Now we have only bilateral agreement between Bangladesh and India but the river catchments cover the territories of five countries; therefore, JRC members should be Bangladesh, India, China, Nepal and Bhutan. Need for cooperation among the five countries on the water-sharing issue should follow international rules and regulations."[44]

Central Research Findings

The major areas of research findings are presented below.

Inter-state Conflicts

Fresh water scarcity may one day lead to Third World War if proper steps are not taken immediately, since the demand for fresh water is increasing while supply on the other hand is decreasing drastically. Since water security directly impacts human security, it is a potential source of conflict with growing concerns that climate change would undermine water resources and engender greater water conflict. The study reveals that in Bangladesh, water insecurity will be the biggest challenge with regard to ensuring its national security as its vulnerabilities come from both internal and external sources. The suffering of Bangladesh is going to be intensified in the near future as India and China will build 200 big and small dams on the Himalayan rivers: Yangtze, Brahmaputra and Ganges to meet their growing water needs.[45] In this context, disputes are very much likely between the states since scarcity of fresh water

resources are intensifying drastically. Besides, the non-compromising attitude of India towards water sharing can lead to conflict between Bangladesh and India.

Intra-state Conflicts

Water shortages are also a key concern in areas affected by salinity. Stagnant saline water on the soil surface often seep into ground water stores, contaminating fresh water and making it useless for irrigation or drinking purposes. Tension can arise between communities in areas where tube-wells are located at a low altitude and are vulnerable to contamination by salt water. Water scarcity can lead to health concerns and can also intensify competition and tensions between communities which will lead to intra-state conflicts. Besides, reduced access to water has a severe effect on women who are often responsible for providing water for the family. It can increase female insecurity and sexual violence.

Political and Economic Instability

Environmental factors also have the potential to play a negative effect on the domestic politics of Bangladesh. It is possible for certain pressure groups like radical Muslim groups to use a particular environmental factor like water-sharing as a political issue, especially against India. This can upset domestic power balances and cause political instability. The study also reveals that the impact of fresh water scarcity will accelerate the economic instability of Bangladesh as water is essential for irrigation.

Increase in the Prevalence of Diseases

The decline in the availability of fresh water will increase the prevalence of diseases. The contamination of water after flooding can intensify outbreaks of skin diseases, eye infection, cholera, diarrhea, dysentery and fever. Communities in low lying areas that use tube-wells to access water are particularly vulnerable. Saline inundation of river waters is having a significant effect on people’s health in Bangladesh as people will be forced to drink pond water once river water becomes contaminated.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

Many theories have been developed with regard to the environment. It can be said that from a realist perspective. two central concepts are power and national interest. The international society is an anarchical state-system. The system is therefore a self-help one. Realism assumes that states and their populations need natural resources to survive. There is competition between states for these scarce resources. War is often the result of such competition and conflict. As Hans Morgenthau indictes, it leads to "the struggle for power and peace." Extreme versions of realism, such as the geopolitical theories of Karl Haushofer, look at the security implications of strategic raw materials. Both German and Japanese expansion in the 1930s was partly a search for raw materials.[46] Some see President George Bush's intervention in Iraq as an attempt to secure the oil resources of the Middle East.[47] Many scholars think that the recent USA-led coalition intervening in Libya was not for protecting human rights but to insure its energy security.[48]

Lastly, if we look at the present Manmohan-Hasina summit (2011), India did not show any compromising attitudes with regard to water sharing although commitments were made. In this regard, Mamata Banerjee said:

“We have no enmity with Bangladesh but first we have to uphold our national interest. We cancelled the agreement as we found the agreement ‘detrimental to the interests’ of West Bengal”.[49]

A realist point of view is clearly reflected in Mamata’s stand with regard to Teesta water sharing.

Policy Implications

Water scarcity has to be taken as a serious problem from a long-term perspective. As a gradual process, it may seem less severe today, but we have to think about the next generation and whether they will get fresh water to meet their thirst. To address the issue of water scarcity, some policy recommendations are presented below for the government of Bangladesh and India.

Integrated Water Resource Management and Promoting Regional Cooperation

As water management of Transboundary Rivers of GBM basins involve different countries namely, Bangladesh, India, China, Nepal, and Bhutan, integrated water resource management is essential. There is no alternative but cooperation with regard to regional and global issues of water sharing. Regional cooperation of the co-riparian countries is crucial for

Bangladesh. It needs to build coalitions and strengthen lobbying with Nepal, Bhutan, as well as with Pakistan, as there is a water sharing dispute between India and Pakistan. Many experts suggest that it is not possible to resolve water dispute with India bilaterally and, therefore, we have to bring the issue to a multilateral forum like the UN. In this regard, former Joint Secretary A. B. M. S. Zahur said, "We have waited for 36 years and failed to solve the problem bilaterally. It appears we have no option except taking the matter before the UN to draw the attention of the world community to our miserable plight. We want dispensation of justice, not favor or benevolence."[50]

According to Shamsher Chowdhury, “The water sharing dispute goes back three decades and such disputes are seldom resolved through bilateral agreements. Time has come for the ruling establishment to internationalize the issue involving the UN and the International Court of Justice.”[51] Air Commodore (Retired) Ishfaq Ilahi said, "Unless the riparian countries join together to ensure optimum use of water, there is the likelihood of conflict and tension in the region in the future".[52]

M. Rashed Chowdhury claimed, "SAARC can play an important role in reducing vulnerability of future water-related disasters through regional cooperation on water management and conservation and development of cooperative projects at the regional level in terms of exchange of best practices and knowledge, capacity building, and transfer of eco-friendly technologies."[53] Lastly, there are a number of initiatives with regard to promoting regional cooperation which must be implemented. In this regard, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue can be considered (which includes Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and China) as one avenue for facilitating regional cooperation in water management in the Himalayan region.[54]

Dealing With Teesta Waters

Equity and fairness must be ensured from the Indian side not only in dealing with Teesta but other common rivers as inequity exists in the current Teesta water sharing pattern. In this regard, Praful Bidwai argues that, “India reportedly has access to 32,000 cusecs during the lean season for 8 million people, while Bangladesh makes do with just 5,000 cusecs for 20 million”.[55]

During the dry season, especially beginning in September and going up to March, Bangladesh requires the Teesta waters for agriculture. Thus, there is an urgent need for an agreement on Teesta water sharing with India. During the dry season, the flow of the Teesta goes down anywhere between 5,000 and 6,000 cusecs while the demand for water by Bangladesh and India are 8,000 cusecs and 21,000 cusecs respectively.[56] Therefore, it is an issue that needs careful handling. It can be said that the Teesta agreement will definitely be a foundation on which further cooperation can be forged especially on sharing of the waters of Dhaka, Dudkumar, Manu, Khowai, Gumti and Muhuri rivers to meet future water demands.

Moreover, there is a need to assess the realistic water needs in both countries and should have appropriate plans which will be supported by adequate budgets to face future water scarcity. Lastly, it is reported that, in the bilateral meetings with India, we depend mainly on Indian statistics.[57] Thus, the decisions in such meetings are usually favorable to India. We must take immediate measures to improve our weaker position in this regard.

From the above arguments, it is clear that the existing literature supports both the conventional wisdom, as well as the alternative. But India’s non-compromising attitude in the negotiation table and lack of integrated water sharing management ideas are the main reasons which require immediate attention.

Bangladesh’s largest and most significant neighbor is India. Both countries share a vast land boundary and scholars and policy makers of both countries believe that Bangladesh’s relations with India are very important geographically, politically, economically, and strategically. Bangladesh has to utilize its geo-strategic importance with India while negotiating. The deal on transit will fulfill India's long-standing demand for easier and shorter connectivity between its mainland and land-locked north-eastern states. Therefore, at the negotiation table, Bangladeshi negotiators must keep in mind the tactics of conducting diplomacy that obviously we must get something for giving something and, particularly, we must ensure our national interest through strong diplomacy. Bangladesh can ensure just and fair water sharing through strong diplomacy.

Turning to the supply side, large dam projects are not the only answer for India; there are other possibilities. Local rainwater harvesting and watershed development are also part of the supply

side answers to the demand. Through a combination of these two approaches, on the demand side, the practice of utmost economy and efficiency in water-use and of resource-conservation, and on the supply side, efforts to augment the availability of usable water through extensive recourse to local water-harvesting and watershed development, it may be possible to avert a crisis, though the situation will undoubtedly be difficult and will call for careful management.

Relations between Bangladesh and India have often been complicated, challenging, tense, crisis-ridden and overwhelmed by accusations and counter accusations. But, however negative one might be to India and vice versa, a strong, bold, healthy relationship is a must for the betterment of both countries. And with regard to water disputes, mutual cooperation is a must to resolve the issue.

Finally, Bangladesh and India must respect each other's legitimate rights and understand each other's needs. Besides, mutual trust on commitments, implementation of commitments, and refraining from confusing statements and actions are also imperative for resolving disputes. And considering the future, both parties should minimize their differences for the sake of maintaining good neighborly relationships; Bangladesh should also maintain close contact with states adjacent to India to avoid future misunderstanding.[58] Lastly, if other regions or countries can reach equitable agreements, why should Bangladesh not be able to reach similar agreements?

Endnotes

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